

ANAÏS NIN, HER LIFE AND WORK: AN INTRODUCTION

Catherine Broderick

Anaïs Nin is one of this century's most original authors, the *grande dame* of American literature, "more important perhaps in the life of 20th century letters than any other figure than Pound... a shaper of the forms of both prose and poetry in the past 40 years."¹ Her fiction and the five published volumes of her Diary have been translated into a dozen languages, and there is a magazine devoted to her called *Under the Sign of Pisces: Anaïs Nin and Her Circle* published by the Ohio State University Libraries since 1970. Five of her works are available in Japanese translation: three works of fiction—*A Spy in the House of Love* (*Ai no ie no supai*), translated by Koji Nakata; *House of Incest* (*Kinshinsokan no ie*) and "Stella," translated by Takao Sugawara; and two works of non-fiction—*The Novel of the Future* (*Mirai no shosetsu*), translated by Masako Karatani, and *The Diary of Anaïs Nin, Volume One: 1931-1934* (*Anaïs Nin no Nikki: 1931-1934*), translated by Masako Hara.² An article on "The Reception of Anaïs Nin in Japan" appeared in *Pisces* in 1974.³

Anaïs Nin, whose name "Anaïs" is Greek and was given her because it was a popular name for girls at the time, was born of a Danish-French mother and a Spanish father in Paris on February 21, 1903, under the sign of Pisces, the sign of water. Water is her natural element, and she has said that if she were not a writer she would have liked to have been a scuba diver—but she is a scuba diver of the unconscious, of the psyche.⁴ The characteristic of water of course is to flow, and one of Anaïs Nin's key words is fluidity. She says in a recent interview: "The idea of fluidity means that you are changing constantly and that's a hard concept for

people to accept. In art fluidity is a musical thing, a musical attitude to writing. Music is fluid, emotions are fluid. We are not chronologically organized: sometimes we're in the past, sometimes we're in the present, another day perhaps we're obsessed with the future. Our memory fades back and is very fluid. So the closer we come to creating that feeling in our work, the closer we come to what life is, which is constant change, and openness and evolution."⁵

Anaïs Nin lives in the future, and her great desire is to speak for all women reaching into the future. "To Anaïs, woman is the grand lover of the world. Woman represents creativity and union, the physical and spiritual link between the unconscious and the objective. In her writing Anaïs desires to express the drama of woman in relation to herself, her conflict between selfishness and individuality, and how to make manifest the cosmic consciousness she feels."⁶ This cosmic consciousness is a sort of principle of integration which operates at the deepest level of the imaginative life, a level so rich and well developed that its manner of expression actually grows out of that which it expresses. As Anaïs Nin herself has said: "I write as I breathe, naturally, flowingly, spontaneously, out of an overflow, not as a substitute for life. I am more interested in human beings than in writing, more interested in lovemaking than in writing, more interested in living than in writing. More interested in becoming a work of art than in creating one."⁷

"Woman," Anaïs Nin has written, "is the mermaid with fish-tail dipped in the unconscious."⁸ This dip into the unconscious began for her when she was eleven years old, and her composer-pianist father, whom she adored, abruptly abandoned the family. Her mother took the three children to New York, where Anaïs remained until she returned to France ten years later. In the midst of all this upheaval and travel Anaïs Nin

began an inner journey: "The diary began as a diary of a journey, to record everything for my father. It was written for him, and I had intended to send it to him. It was really a letter, so he could follow us into a strange land, know about us. It was also to be an island, in which I could take refuge in an alien land, write French, think my thoughts, hold on to my soul, to myself."⁹ This desire to hold on to herself, to truly know herself has been a constant motivation in the writing of the Diary.

As time went on, the Diary grew to a monumental work, monumental but secret. In *The Novel of the Future*, Anaïs Nin explains: "I preferred the freedom of the diary. To write always about what interested me, not what I should be writing. To be open and not self-conscious. To say everything. The secrecy of the diary was a great incentive to honesty. In life (and in the novels) I had a painful awareness of the sensitivity of other human beings, and like the Japanese, I did not like to offend, to hurt others' feelings, shame them, embarrass them..."¹⁰ All of the truth of her feelings was expressed in the Diary as it could not be in her life outside the Diary, and so the Diary became a tangible process of growth, seeking for balance, realization of the true self. Having begun by seeking approval from her father, Anaïs Nin later nourished the Diary with her struggles for integration of the masculine artistic qualities identified with her father and the feminine impulse to love and comfort man the artist. The reconciliation of these apparently opposite principles took many years, but in the end Anaïs Nin achieved a balance between them, and became both artist and woman to a degree that no other Western woman has. Her courage and perseverance has created a voice for all women, for, as Deena Metzger says: "We come to the *Diary* not out of curiosity but out of a need for life. It is both a method for our being as well as a mirror for ourselves."¹¹ We learn from Anaïs Nin that to be

an artist, to work productively does not have to mean loss of ourselves as women, that the flowering of a woman as artist does not have to diminish her as woman.

In her writing as in her life, Anaïs Nin has always gone against the tide of the conventional, the faddishly popular, the static. She has been a quiet revolutionary, manning no barricades, burning no bridges, but going the often lonesome road of seeking truth and helping others see who they are. Hers is an intensely personal vision which intersects the lives of other human beings by its intimacy. Her insight gives her writing the element of wisdom which made Henry Miller and others compare the Diary to the *Confessions* of St. Augustine and the novels of Marcel Proust.¹²

It has been said that in the Diary Anaïs Nin's "sense of time is an Eastern one of suspended flux rather than the Western norm of a sequence of events."¹³ Her diaries are quite different from what Westerners usually think of as writers' journals. "Like the great Japanese poetic diaries of the tenth and eleventh centuries, they go far beyond the mere recording of daily events, and like those diaries of the Heian court ladies, they transcend the artificial Western categories of fact and fiction, life and art, in order to discover the power of truth combined with the poetry of fiction."¹⁴ Anaïs Nin herself seems to have become aware of this Eastern impulse in her work, for when she later discovered the Oriental writers through English translations she realized that her own directions were very similar to theirs. "The Japanese speak of achieving balance between serenity and intensity," she writes in *The Novel of the Future*. "It is very essential in their art and in their life. I sought such serenity and balance in my life and in my work equally..."¹⁵

This image of the search for balance is central to the first volume of the Diary. Like the other four published volumes (there are more than

150 unpublished notebooks), Volume One traces the steps in growth, the struggles to achieve each step, each precarious balance until some new sureness is achieved. At the beginning of this first volume there is a striking image of a "large closed iron gate": "When I look at the large green iron gate from my window it takes on the air of a prison gate. An unjust feeling, since I know I can leave the place whenever I want to, and since I know that human beings place upon an object, or a person, this responsibility of being the obstacle when the obstacle lies always within one's self."¹⁶ The closed gate symbolically is the inhibitions on her creativity, inhibitions by conformity, by fear, by lack of self-definition.

The opening of this gate, the overcoming of the obstacles deep within the self is the theme threaded throughout this volume, and at the end we see victory through the symbolic act of the birth of Anaïs Nin's stillborn child. "I place my two hands on my stomach and very slowly, very softly, with the tips of my fingers I drum, drum, drum on my stomach in circles. Round and round, softly, with eyes open in great serenity. [...] Eyes open, nerves quiet, I drum gently on my stomach for a long while. [...] Softly I drum, drum, drum. I feel my womb stirring, dilating, ... Drum drum drum drum drum. 'I am ready!'"¹⁷ This drumming is the symbolic work of a woman coming into harmony with her inner self, finding her own rhythm alone and without assistance from human or mechanical means, and out of this harmony a new woman is born, a creative woman. The womb dilates, the gate opens, the real self emerges, strong, integrated, free. On the last page of this volume of the Diary, Anaïs Nin writes: "Psychoanalysis did save me because it allowed the birth of the real me, a most dangerous and painful one for a woman, filled with dangers; for no one has ever loved an adventurous woman as they have loved adven-

turous men. The birth of the real me might have ended like that of my unborn child.”¹⁸

Some of the responsibility for the success of this integration is perhaps attributable to the psychoanalyst Otto Rank with whom Anaïs Nin worked through many of the problems of the cultural invisibility of woman and the roots of her inarticulateness. Rank’s illuminating the connections between man and woman rather than concentrating on the illusory divisions was constructive in Anaïs Nin’s forging of her own identity with sureness, in her becoming a totally creative woman, as a person and as a writer. Precisely because of the extreme subjectivity of such a journey to integration, the Diary traces for all women the path to inner liberation, the only true liberation available to anyone. Anaïs Nin wrote in 1970: “In my diaries I carefully recorded the conflicts, superstitions, the concepts which handicapped woman, and how to transcend them organically, step by step, how to involve men in this growth.”¹⁹

The kind of liberation Anaïs Nin has always advocated is a psychological liberation, “the liberation from *within* which has to begin with a study of our cultural, racial, family, or psychological patterns.”²⁰ It also must be the result of an understanding of the patterns of the unconscious which are also explored in the Diary. In her fiction these patterns realized through the Diary are at the basis of the structures Anaïs Nin creates. The depths of the human unconscious, the meaning of the dreams generated there, the deep and hidden motivations for actions, the obsessions which haunt us all are the realities which she explores, explains, and seems magically to open for the reader’s understanding. Each work is a quest for the meaning of experience, but a quest and a meaning filtered through the emotional aspects of experience to an illumination of the deepest inner reality one can know.

In order to communicate this quest and the reality to which it leads, Anaïs Nin uses what she calls in *The Novel of the Future* "abstraction." "By abstraction," she writes, "I do not mean dehumanization. I mean abstraction in the sense the Japanese have used it, and some Western painters, in the selection of important details. [...] I select parts of the external world which reveal the internal, the parts which are necessary to the inner drama."²¹ Like the Japanese writer Natsume Soseki, Anaïs Nin is a born storyteller, and like Soseki she deals with the psychological state of the characters in a novel largely through a personal style of abstraction, i. e., by leaving much unsaid and giving to the carefully selected external details the job of revealing the internal drama. The position these two authors take in relation to their characters is also similar, for they both seem to feel their protagonists are making mistakes with their lives, but the authors leave to the reader the work of understanding just what these mistakes are and how they are made. Both Nin and Soseki show women of strong will, women in motion physically, emotionally and intellectually. In portraying characters, too, they are similar, for they both show that we all reveal ourselves most accurately in moments of emotional crisis, in moments of "flare-ups in relation to others."²²

The principal concern in the fiction of Anaïs Nin and Natsume Soseki is the same: they both explore the question of human relationships, the question of how we live with each other. The works of both authors show that how we live with others is a function of how we live with ourselves, and that those characters who do not trust themselves (Sabina in *A Spy in the House of Love* or Ichiro Nagano in *Kōjin*, for example) immerse themselves in patterns of isolation and self-destruction which destroy relationships in a widening circle around them. For both Soseki and Nin seem to believe that life is a matter of relationships and not

responsibility for others, and they hold the individual responsible for his own inner self, concentrating on the drama of the inner self as the central drama of the novel. Soseki, in fact, seems to advocate removing oneself from the distractions of the material world in order to find one's reality in unity with Nature and thereby with oneself. Anaïs Nin also advocates leaving the distractions of the material in order to become one with the inner self.

In her fiction, Anaïs Nin uses her knowledge of psychology and of symbolism to reveal characters and their states of being. Her symbolism is poetic in quite a different mode from that of Soseki, for she is a sort of scuba diver of the inner life, and her purpose is to write dramas as the unconscious lives them. For some readers her work appears difficult at first glance because the psychological drama is told from the psychological level. This creates a sort of smooth surface at first glance, a surface in which the reader sometimes feels he cannot gain a foothold. This is the same feeling one has upon first approaching Soseki, but for very different reasons. In the latter case it is because the surface of daily life is rendered in such terms of ordinariness that the foothold for the symbolic, for the interpretative, for the understandable eludes the superficial reader. Neither writer is obscure in intention or execution; it is the reader on whom the burden falls to shift his mental gears from the surface world of appearances to the inner world of psychological reality. Once this is done the seemingly impenetrable surface of the works yields easily to deeper reading and true understanding.

One of the best examples of Anaïs Nin's ability to take the reader into the unconscious of a character is *A Spy in the House of Love*. This novel is the psychological portrayal of the struggle of a woman who cannot live with the quiet serenity of her husband but is driven to other loves

and finds only the torment of guilt. Sabina's perpetual flight is not from reality or from her husband, but from confrontation with herself. Attractive, intense, dramatic in dress and behavior, Sabina lives on the level of her primitive feelings without realizing it. She feels out of control, fragmented, and unable to form a synthesis. She only begins to understand the problem of her inner fragmentation when she "understood Duchamp's painting of a Nude Descending a Staircase. Eight or ten outlines of the same woman, like many multiple exposures of a woman's personality, neatly divided into many layers, walking down the stairs in unison."²³ She sees the outlines individually, empty of unifying power; she sees the spaces between the outlines as threats because they are the openings from which she fears the inner core is escaping. She does not see the outlines as viable selves, related and unified through fluidity.

Sabina's fragmentation is rooted in a dual conflict which is at once the conflict women have as they feel that whatever of themselves is given in the world must be stolen from the family and the home, and the conflict of their struggle to unite and integrate all the selves they realize they possess. This integration is not a once-for-all permanent achievement like enlightenment in Zen Buddhism, but it is, in the opinion of Morris Philipson, writing about Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, rather a series of "moments of conscious fulfillment—the moments when we feel that we are 'all put together.'"²⁴ Mr. Philipson says that these moments "do not depend upon ourselves alone. . . . they are contingent upon our arriving at a balance between belief in what our best self is at the moment and belief in the accuracy of interpretation of everything outside of ourselves that we depend upon."²⁵ In Sabina's case, the fact that she does not trust herself means that she cannot achieve such a balance because she isolates her response to a man as an aberration rather than seeing it as a concrete

clue to her own varied character. She feels she is acting in spite of her best self rather than with her best self as she responds to a new lover. The dream of self-realization she hopes to achieve through an ever-new lover is thus doomed to failure. Her neurosis is not one of fragmentation but of obsession with fragmentation; she is wrong not because she is fragmented but because she is filled with guilt about being fragmented. Her weakness is not in giving in to disintegration, but in not seeing the possibility of integration.

Anaïs Nin suggests that the emotions direct how our perceptions are formed. A novel like *A Spy in the House of Love* could thus be called a study of perception. How we see the world determines to a large extent who we are. Our constant interpretations of what we see build our personality. How we respond to the outside world is the content of our inner world. To see Sabina respond to five different men is the key to seeing her inner fragmentation and confusion. Her identification of a man whom she thinks is following her as a lie detector shows how the lie detector exists in her perception as a symbol for her inner guilt. As we have seen in the example of the iron gate at the beginning of the first volume of Anaïs Nin's published Diary, what we attribute to others is always an indication of our inner reality, our real self. But, as we have seen above in Morris Philipson's comments, to know our real self we must be capable of moments of integration.

The drama of *A Spy in the House of Love* is essentially the drama of a woman in relation to herself. The conflict inherent in this drama is felt only on the periphery of Sabina's understanding, however, and so she makes the mistake of looking to others to resolve the conflict for her. When she is with a man, Sabina tries to be at the same time who she is essentially and what she supposes the man wishes her to be. This only

deepens her conflict and intensifies the guilt she feels. We may be tempted to think that her guilt comes from her feeling of having betrayed her husband, but it really comes from her inner but unconscious knowledge that she is, at every moment, betraying herself. This is the greatest human betrayal, and Sabina, like many women, masks this wrong to her self under the guise of faithfulness to a man.

Sabina makes another mistake which we see explained in the Diary Volume One, that is, Sabina wants to be free like a man. In the Diary, Anaïs Nin writes: "Wasn't it D. H. Lawrence who wrote of how women took their pattern from man, and proceeded to be what man invented?... Few women had vision into themselves!"²⁶ Otto Rank added, during this same discussion with Anaïs Nin about women: "Man is always trying to create a woman who will fill his needs, and that makes her untrue to herself."²⁷ By trying so desperately to make herself fit man's patterns, Sabina is doing violence to herself. All through Anaïs Nin's work, the same problem emerges—woman is constantly trying to live according to the way in which she thinks man lives, or according to what she thinks man wishes of her. The emphasis in both cases is wrong for woman; instead, she must learn the lesson of the drumming which we saw earlier in the birth scene from the Diary, the lesson of coming into harmony with herself, of fusing her selves into an integrated whole, a feminine whole, an independent and viable personal whole.

In order to achieve this extremely difficult ideal, woman must abandon man's patterns, and this makes women afraid—it is one reason why Sabina was desperately afraid of facing herself. In *The Novel of the Future*, Anaïs Nin writes: "Sabina did not look upon herself with her own vision, but through the eyes of others and this was also the secret of her disintegration."²⁸ Sabina, in her fantasies, was a whole person. Her

"difficulties only develop when she begins to act out her wishes, fantasies, and dreams. Sabina is a close study of the divided self seeking to maintain its own world in a vacuum. Testing it in relation to others is disastrous. She is faced with her impotence to love."²⁹ *A Spy in the House of Love* is a disturbing book because it forces us to confront our own fragmentation, our own response to others, our expectations of others, our own desperateness and failings. But, if we read this novel, as well as any of the other fiction by Anaïs Nin, along with the Diary, it is no longer quite so disturbing. For in the crucible of understanding which we find in the Diary we can burn off our fears and become confident that a woman, a person, can create the self as a whole creature. The sense of continuity of the self and the resolution of conflict which elude many of the characters in Anaïs Nin's fiction are achieved in the life and by the intelligence of one person, herself, in the Diary. At a time when the interrelationship between biography and fiction is once again being debated,³⁰ Anaïs Nin's work shows us that the two are organically related, that they do not interfere with nor limit each other. They have a symbiotic relationship in which the values of invention bow to those of imagination. Anaïs Nin's work is one of the most extensive and complete examples of a successful integration of life and art in twentieth century literature.

NOTES

1. Diane Wakoski, "The Craft of Plumbers, Carpenters, & Mechanics: A Tribute to Anaïs Nin," *The American Poetry Review*, January-February 1973, pp. 46-47.
2. Translations in Japanese are by Koji Nakata, *Ai no ie no supai* (Tokyo: Kawade-shobo, 1966); Takao Sugawara, *Kinshinsokan no ie* and "Stella" (Tokyo: Taiyo-sha, 1969); Masako Karatani, *Mirai no shosetsu* (Tokyo: Shobun-sha, 1970); Masako Hara, *Anaïs Nin no Nikki: 1931-1934* (Tokyo: Kawade-shobo, 1974).
3. Catherine Broderick (with Masako Karatani), "The Reception of Anaïs Nin in Japan," *Under the Sign of Pisces: Anaïs Nin and Her Circle*, 5, No. 1 (Winter, 1974), 5-11.
4. Anaïs Nin, *The Novel of the Future* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1968), p. 120.
5. Priscilla English, "An Interview with Anaïs Nin (September, 1971)," *A Casebook on Anaïs Nin*, ed. Robert Zaller (New York: New American Library, 1974), p. 194.
6. Valerie Harms, "The Cosmos of Anaïs Nin," *Celebration with Anaïs Nin*, ed. Valerie Harms (Riverside, Connecticut: Magic Circle Press, 1973), p. 10.
7. Anaïs Nin, *The Diary of Anaïs Nin: Volume Four, 1944-1947*, ed. Gunther Stuhlmann (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971), p. 177.
8. Harms, p. 11.
9. Anaïs Nin, *The Diary of Anaïs Nin, Volume One, 1931-1934*, ed. Gunther Stuhlmann (New York: The Swallow Press and Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1966), p. 202.
10. Nin, *The Novel of the Future*, p. 143.
11. Deena Metzger, "The Diary: The Ceremony of Knowing," *A Casebook on Anaïs Nin*, ed. Robert Zaller (New York: New American Library, 1974), p. 134.
12. Orville Clark, "Anaïs Nin: Studies in the New Erotology," *A Casebook on Anaïs Nin*, ed. Robert Zaller (New York: New American Library, 1974), p. 105.

13. Tristine Rainer, "Anaïs Nin's *Diary I: The Birth of the Young Woman as an Artist*," *A Casebook on Anaïs Nin*, ed. Robert Zaller (New York: New American Library, 1974), p. 161.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
15. Nin, *The Novel of the Future*, p. 34.
16. Nin, *The Diary of Anaïs Nin, Volume One: 1931-1934*, p. 4.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 345.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 359-360.
19. Anaïs Nin, "On Women's Liberation," *Under the Sign of Pisces: Anaïs Nin and Her Circle*, 2, No. 1 (Winter, 1971), 2.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
21. Nin, *The Novel of the Future*, p. 24.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 159 and 79.
23. Anaïs Nin, *A Spy in the House of Love* (Chicago: The Swallow Press Inc., 1959), p. 127.
24. Morris Philipson, "Mrs. Dalloway, 'What's the Sense of Your Parties?'" *Critical Inquiry*, 1, No. 1 (September 1974), 128.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Nin, *The Diary of Anaïs Nin, Volume One: 1931-1934*, p. 276.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 278.
28. Nin, *The Novel of the Future*, p. 138.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
30. Cf., for example, Jacques Barzun, "Biography and Criticism—a Misalliance Disputed," *Critical Inquiry*, 1, No. 3 (March)1975), 479-496.

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Résumé

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Anaïs Nin is one of this century's most original authors, the *grande dame* of American literature, "more important perhaps in the life of 20th century letters than any other figure than Pound. . . a shaper of the forms of both prose and poetry in the past 40 years." Her fiction and the five published volumes of her Diary have been translated into a dozen languages.

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